

Part 2 The decorative, the expressive and the primitive

In the writings on modern art that appeared in France and Germany during the first decade of this century, concepts of the 'primitive', the 'expressive' and the 'decorative' have tended to be value-laden and have often been used (in differing ways) as indicators of the 'modern' or avant-garde qualities of the works in question. In this section I will consider some of the shifting frames of reference (aesthetic, social and political) of these terms, and the ways in which they have overlapped. I will also examine the extent to which the practices of art concerned could be seen to embody or represent such qualities.

The decorative and the 'culte de la vie': Matisse and Fauvism

Traditional histories of Fauvism describe a group of progressive young artists who burst onto the scene in 1905, with a display in Gallery seven of the now notorious Salon d'Automne of that year. According to the popular myth they outraged critics and artists alike with their daring, brightly coloured works. These 'unconventional paintings won them the label of 'wild beasts' (*les furies*) with all its connotations of instinctive, spontaneous expression. Although this myth is partly based on actual critical responses, the notion of a radical group which suddenly shook the Parisian art world has been qualified and challenged.¹⁷ It is now well established that many of the so-called 'Fauve' interests had been in evidence well before the 1905 exhibition, and that the critical response to the show was by no means that of universal outrage and consternation (often seen as a necessary qualification for avant-gardism). Several critics saw in their work – especially that of Matisse – evidence of an innovative form of what Maurice Denis called 'pure art' (*L'Ermitage*, 15 November 1905).

The representation of Matisse as '*le fauve des furies*' – as the artist whose work embodied the most significant elements of this new art movement – was a consistent response to this and other Fauve exhibitions. His work in particular was singled out in terms of its 'originality' and its 'expressive' qualities – hence the emphasis on Matisse in this section.¹⁸

The problematic nature of the label 'primitive' and its shifting meanings within early twentieth-century art criticism is exemplified in both contemporary and subsequent attempts to define the primitivism of the Fauves. Critics of different political persuasions often used the term '*barbare*', variously translated as 'primitive' or 'barbarian', to describe their work. In fact, in some of the more conservative reviews of the 1905 Salon d'Automne, the associations of the label sustained a nineteenth-century pejorative meaning. The seemingly naïve aspects of works such as *Woman with a Hat* or *Open Window at Collioure* (Plates 39, 40) were seen as evidence of a lack of artistic competence. Hence Marcel Nicolle's now notorious comment in the *Journal de Rouen* of 1905 that these works were 'nothing whatever to do with painting ... the barbaric and naïve sport of a child who plays with a box of colours he has just got as a Christmas present'.

Nicolle's explicit and pejorative association between avant-garde techniques and child-like painting was a common one. The strategic avant-garde response was to appropriate the connection and invest it with value as part of a post-Gauguin re-evaluation of unsophisticated modes of painting. Many of the more liberal critics took up the 'child-like'

¹⁷ See, for example, E. C. Oppler, *Fauvism Reexamined*.

¹⁸ The debate which surrounded the concept of 'expression' as it was employed by Matisse (*Notes of a Painter*) and other commentators on the Fauves, is discussed by R. Benjamin in Matisse's '*Notes of a Painter*': *Criticism, Theory and Context* 1891–1908.



Plate 39 Henri Matisse, *Fenêtre ouverte*, Collioure (Open Window at Collioure), 1905, oil on canvas, collection Mrs John Hay Whitney, New York. © Succession H. Matisse / DACS 1993.

association, either satirizing the narrow philistinism it represented, or seeing it as a positive virtue. Guillaume Apollinaire for example introduced his review of the Salon d'Automne with a satirical song:

Mets ta jupe en cretonne
Et ton bonnet, mignonne!
Nous allons rire un brin
De l'art contemporain
Et du Salon d'Automne
(*Chroniques d'Art*, 1902–1918, p.33)

Put on your cotton skirt
And your bonnet, my pet!
We're going to have a good laugh
At modern art
and the Salon d'Automne

Thus the seemingly child-like qualities of the Fauve works also became the main focus of contemporary debates about their 'modern' status and, as we shall see, of their associations with the 'decorative'. The crude, unfinished appearance of some of these canvases, with areas often left unpainted and/or unpainted, characterized the style. While the critics' focus on this aspect of Fauve work has provided endless material to bolster some of the clichés about the modern artist's painful struggle against philistine attack, it also carried with it a complex cultural baggage, rooted in various contemporary discourses of primitivism.

The idea of the 'barbarian', then, with its connotations of unnamed, direct expression, was frequently associated with the 'child-like' or the naïve. Both sets of associations could certainly have been read into the idea of the artist as a 'wild beast', and were implicit in contemporary critical representations of the early group as the expression of '*impétuosité*

Plate 40 Henri Matisse,
La Femme au chapeau
(*Woman with a Hat*), 1905,
oil on canvas, 81 x 60 cm.
San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art. Bequest of Elise
S. Haas. © Succession
H. Matisse/DACS 1993.



juvénile et barbare ('a youthful, primitive impetuosity'; Oppler, *Fauvism Re-examined*, p.344). Such attitudes to artistic expression may also owe something to the cult of Nietzsche, which had already spread to France by the late 1890s. In 1898, Henri Albert's translation of the complete works, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, was met with great enthusiasm by many writers and intellectuals. For the French, this appeal lay partly in the range of intellectual interests with which his work could be associated. As Oppler has shown, Nietzsche's exaltation of life and individualism could be seen to encourage individualist and anarchist tendencies, and notions of free artistic expression. On the other hand, his defence of Mediterranean culture, of '*l'esprit latin contre l'esprit germanique*' ('the Latin spirit against the German spirit') could be seen to encourage a more traditionalist pro-French Latin culture (*Fauvism Re-examined*, p.202). (Nietzsche himself used the labels Dionysian and Apollonian to represent similar alternative modes of artistic expression.)

It is now well documented that the early Fauves, particularly Derain and Vlaminck, who worked together in Chatou in 1901, were well versed in Nietzsche's work, as were writers and critics such as André Gide, the poet Apollinaire and the art critic André Salmon, with whom members of the Fauve group associated. In fact both sets of Nietzschean interests summarized above could very possibly be seen to have informed

Matisse's preoccupations, and perhaps some of the technical developments which ensued in the period 1904-7. While the supposed '*impétuosité barbare*' of the Salon d'Automne exhibits could be identified with a Nietzschean cult of spontaneous individualism, Matisse's slightly later interest in a more controlled mode of painting, what he called in his *Notes of a Painter* 'an art of balance, purity and serenity' (p.135) could be seen to fit the other Nietzschean formulation.

A possible literary connection can be found in the writings of André Gide and the cult of 'Naturism'. Gide's *Les Nourritures terrestres*, published in 1897, exalts a direct, spontaneous approach to life and sexuality, a *culte de la vie* which became the distinguishing characteristic of the Naturist movement. The specifically French concept of '*joie de vivre*', the idea of revelling freely in physical sensations and direct experiences is often associated with Naturism and with Gide's writing. In fact many supporters of the movement actually called themselves 'barbarians' to signify their joyful return to natural experiences. With such ideas in common currency the label 'wild beasts' was easily interchangeable with that of 'barbarians', with all its connotations of direct physical and sexual expression.

The interests summarized above have been associated with very different political attitudes within the culture of 'la Belle Époque'. The idea of avant-garde artists as impetuous 'wild beasts' was frequently identified with anti-establishment anarchist tendencies, already visible in France in the 1880s and flourishing in response to the Dreyfus affair. This affair, which revealed massive corruption within government institutions and the military, created a fertile climate for political and intellectual anarchism, which reached its height in the 1890s. However, the only member of the Fauve group who actively espoused anarchist causes was Vlaminck. While the other Fauves (at least during the early years of the movement) adopted a mode of spontaneous artistic expression which could be loosely associated with anarchist attitudes, this did not involve any conscious political commitment.

Attempts to relate Fauve works to specific political interests are fraught with problems, for some of Matisse's works from this period have also been associated with a more conservative bourgeois tradition. His middle-class leisure subjects, such as his Collioure landscapes and harbour scenes, or his later nudes in Mediterranean surroundings (Plates 39, 41), and his more 'Classical' pastoral scenes (which we will discuss shortly) have been represented in these terms. The other classicized 'primitive' tradition suggested by 'an art of balance and order' has been seen to embody contemporary middle-class values of order and stability, the conservative response to the destabilizing anarchism of the post-Dreyfus years. But how do we relate these sorts of interests and associations to the actual paintings, to the techniques and subject-matter employed?

Several critics have associated the seemingly naive painting of early Fauve works with a political anarchism, although this may involve a crude causal relationship.¹⁹ But Matisse himself does seem to have encouraged some less overtly political associations. In the choice of title and subject-matter for his Fauve work *Bonheur de vivre* (Plate 43; sometimes also called *Joie de vivre*) he was indirectly acknowledging Naturist connotations. The work depicts naked women and men dancing, embracing and reclining in nature, a theme which recurs in the work of other Fauve painters such as Derain (Plates 44, 46). Matisse's interpretation emphasizes a lack of inhibition; there are figures dancing wildly in the background (a group later reworked in *La Danse* 1910), while others embrace and many of the women recline in relaxed, erotic poses. But this work is also rooted in pastoral and arcadian themes popular among Symbolist painters (Plate 42), which can be traced back to Poussin's pastoral subjects, in which, mythological themes are enacted in carefully composed landscapes (Plate 45). In *Bonheur de Vivre* Matisse reworks the theme of a Classical arcadia, a peaceful idyllic environment which is also reminiscent of Bouguainville's '*La Nouvelle Cythère*'. In its subject-matter at least, Matisse's painting combines two 'primitive' traditions: a classicized 'primitive', and a (supposedly) more

¹⁹ See, for example, J. P. Crespelle, *Les Fauves*, and C. Chassé, *Les Fauves et leur temps*.

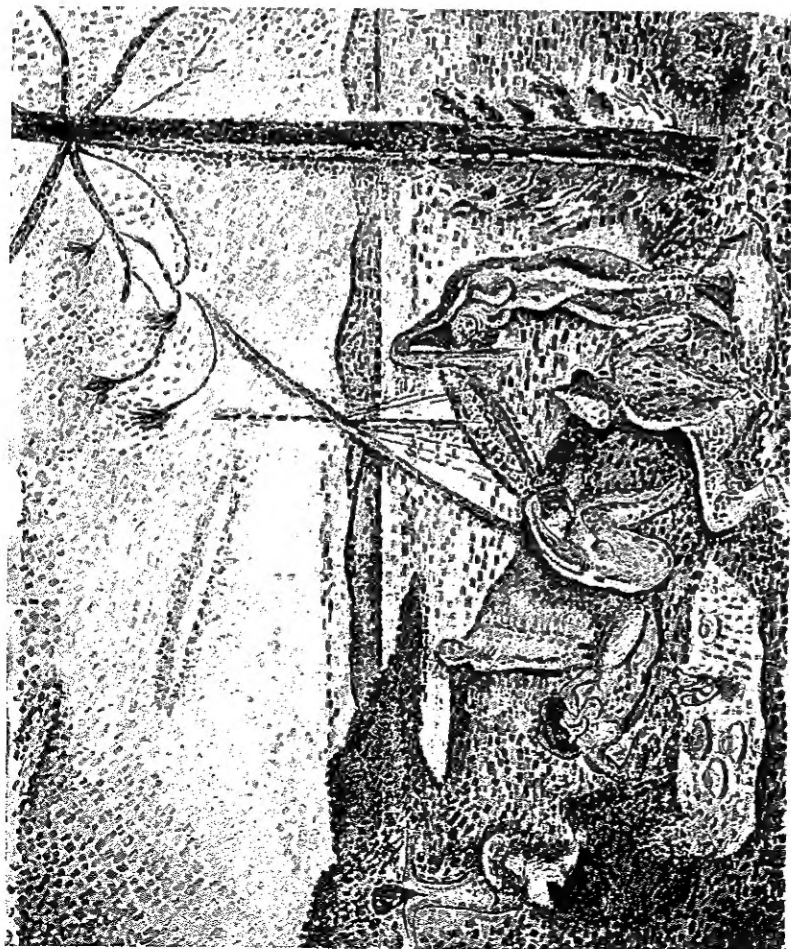


Plate 41 Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme et volupté* (*Luxuriance, Calm and Sensuality*) 1904-5, oil on canvas, 99 x 118 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. © Succession H. Matisse / DACS 1993.

spontaneous *culte de la vie*. And both sets of associations are evoked through the relationship of the *figure* to the landscape. When Matisse includes the human figure (both male and female) in his Fauve landscapes, the landscape theme becomes inflected with many other layers of meaning.

Landscape painting was well established as a dominant genre in both the official Salon and the independent exhibiting societies. The Fauve painters, however, were seen to be developing a form of *paysage décoratif* (decorative landscape), which, as Roger Benjamin has argued, appears 'to have been a modernist addition to the traditional Academic division between the historic landscape (*paysage historique*) with figures in heroic action and the rural landscape (*paysage champêtre*) with its more intimate country setting' (*The Future Landscape*, p.254). While the former was often associated with the work of Poussin, the early Impressionist landscape developed from the latter. For contemporary critics the *paysage décoratif* was one in which the subject-matter need not be of a recognizable location; it was increasingly seen as a means to a more 'decorative' end. In this context the adjective '*décoratif*' signified a schematic or abstracted image, and could be connected with concepts of the *barbare* or *naïf*, whether these terms were being used pejoratively or as a measure of the innovative status of the work.



Plate 42 Charles Maurin, *L'Aurore de l'amour* (*The Dawn of Love*), 1891, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Private Collection.



Plate 43 Henri Matisse, *Bonheur de Vivre* (*Joy of Life*), 1905-6, oil on canvas, 171 x 224 cm. Photograph © 1993 The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania. © Succession H. Matisse / DACS 1993.

Plate 44 André Derain, *L'Age d'Or (The Golden Age)*, 1905, oil on canvas, 176 x 189 cm. Museum of Modern Art, Tehran, Iran. Photograph by courtesy of Peris Galleries, New York. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1993.



Plate 45 Nicolas Poussin, *Les Andriens, known as Grande Bacchanale à la jouissance de luth* (Bacchanalia with Luteplayer), 1630, oil on canvas, 121 x 175 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.



Plate 46 André Derain, *La Danse (The Dance)*, 1906, oil on canvas, 185 x 209 cm. Courtesy of the Fridart Foundation. Photo: John Webb. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1993.

Matisse exhibited *Bonheur de Vivre* at the Salon des Indépendants of 1906, where it became the focus of debate about the value of 'decoration'. While Fauve landscapes without figures (Plate 39), which seemed to contemporaries to be 'abstracted' landscapes, were easily assimilated into the category of the 'decorative', the imagery of *Bonheur de Vivre* made it more difficult to categorize. For some critics the echoes of a reworked Classicism evoked by the frolicking and reclining figures must have jarred with the formal handling of the work. The distorted scale and perspective, the stylized rhythms, loosely painted and flattened areas of colour caused Vauxcelles, for example, to blame the influence of Derain and his dreams of 'pure decoration'.²⁰ Despite his general support of the Fauves, Vauxcelles seems to hold an ambivalent view of an art which is exclusively 'decorative'. By 1906 the term had become unstable, and was used both as a marker of the work's modernity, and in a more pejorative sense to signify the *ornamentation* of the applied arts.

I will return to the problem of these shifting associations later in this section. The point I want to make here is that for critics and artists the debate about the value or otherwise of 'decorative' painting seems to have found a focus in Fauve landscape painting.

²⁰ I am especially indebted to Roger Benjamin whose material on the 'paysage décoratif' has informed my own discussion; see his 'Fauves in the landscape of criticism: metaphor and scandal at the salon'. His constructive criticism of my early draft of this text has been invaluable.

Bonheur de Vivre was only one of several landscapes by Fauve artists which reworked traditional pastoral themes, giving them a modern edge and thereby provoking critical debate. Matisse's earlier *Luxe, calme et volupté* (c.1904–5) suggests a similar combination of meanings. The title is from the chorus of Baudelaire's poem about a sensual arcadia, *L'Invitation au Voyage*:

*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté
Luxe, calme et volupté*

*Everything there is order and beauty
Luxuriance, calm and voluptuousness*

The classicized 'primitive' is evoked, then, by this notion of calm and order in a remote land. Yet it is also a modern leisure scene dominated by figures: women bathers are picknicking naked on a beach at St Tropez, a fishing village and holiday resort. Moreover, despite the Classical references, Matisse's use of the word '*luxe*' in this and other titles of works on similar themes suggests an association with a contemporary cult of '*joie de vivre*'. The French word '*luxe*' has some slightly different resonances to its English equivalent '*luxury*' – it could also suggest voluptuousness, self-indulgence and sensuality. Thus it could be seen to relate to a cult of sensual self-indulgence identified with Naturism and the '*culte de la vie*'. And it is not without significance that in Matisse's work the word '*luxe*' is usually applied to the image of nude women, with its connotations of eroticism and sexual desire.

The handling of *Luxe, calme et volupté* also helped to place it as 'modern': although Matisse does not employ the loose spontaneous application of paint which later provoked the label 'wild-beasts', the somewhat crude adaptation of Neo-Impressionist techniques and the rhythmic distortions and simplifications disrupted some of the more conventional associations of a pastoral theme.



Plate 47 Maurice de Vlaminck, *Les Baigneuses* (*Bathers*), c.1907, oil on canvas, 89 x 116 cm. Private collection. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1993.

African sources

The production of so-called Fauve paintings around 1905–7 also involved a more literal form of primitivism. By 1906 Matisse, Vlaminck and Derain had all started collecting non-Western art. Vlaminck (Plate 47) claimed (in *Dangerous Corner*) to have been the first to 'discover' African art, when he bought three statuettes in a bistro in Argenteuil around 1905; however, he was notorious for embellishing accounts of Fauve activities to give himself a leading role. The issue of which artist, or groups of artists, first 'discovered' African art in ethnographical museums has been endlessly argued over by art historians. However, I want to focus on how these works were perceived by the artists and on how they were absorbed into a culture of the modern associated with the Fauves.

The mythologized 'discovery' of 'primitive' sculpture raises a related problem. What aesthetic or technical aspects of three-dimensional sculptures (largely figures and masks) could be translated into the two-dimensional medium of painting? For those critics who focus on the 'formal affinities' between 'primitive' sculpture and modern art, this is clearly a crucial issue. It is often argued that the increased emphasis on modelling – the suggestion of sculptural effects through faceted planes – which appears in the work of Matisse and Picasso around 1906 was one of the effects of this new interest (see Plate 54). At the same time the stylized, distorted forms of African art could also suggest aesthetic possibilities for surface design, for which the various styles from different regions in Africa offered a range of formal types (see for example Plate 48 and 49).

For some artists this sculptural alternative ran counter to the Fauve emphasis on surface and the optical effects of colour. But for Matisse, African art was one of many artistic sources (of which Islamic art became increasingly important to him) which encouraged him to develop his notion of the 'decorative' and his belief in the importance of surface

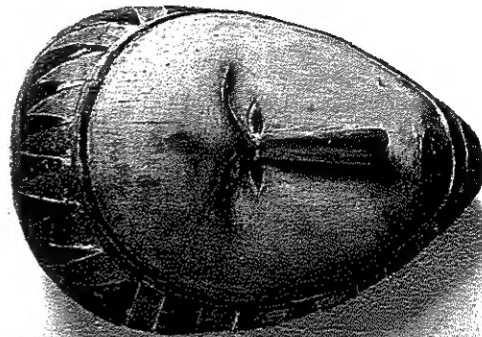


Plate 48 *Fang Mask*, Gabon, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Documentation Photographique. (Formerly in the Maurice de Vlaminck Collection.)

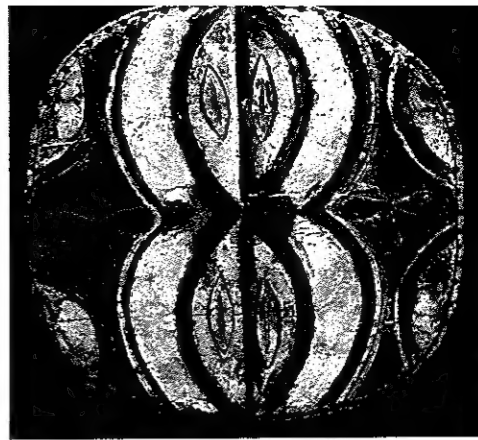


Plate 49 *Téké-Tsanyi mask*, Republic of the Congo, painted wood, height 34 cm. Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva. Photo: P.A. Ferrazzini, Geneva. (Formerly in the André Derain and Charles Ratton collection)

Plate 50 Henri Matisse, *Jeune Matelot (Young Sailor II)*, 1906, oil on canvas, 101 x 83 cm. The Jacques and Natasha Gilmore Collection, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 1993.



design. In the work of Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck there is little direct borrowing from specific African or Oceanic objects. Like most non-Western 'primitive' sources, African art could be 'pillaged' to reinforce prevailing aesthetic interests. Thus there was much in the formal structures and seemingly abstract forms of such works that could be seen to echo the already established symbolic languages of the Post-Impressionist painters, upon which Matisse and the Fauves were already building. It's no coincidence that 1906, the year in which conventions influenced by 'tribal' masks (such as lozenge-shaped eyes and stylized faces) begin to appear in Fauve works (Plate 50) was also the year of a huge Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d'Automne. The show included a large collection of paintings, sculptures and woodcuts from Gauguin's Polynesian period (Plate 51). In fact several of the wood reliefs in this exhibition directly influenced cylindrical wood carvings produced by Matisse at the time (Plates 52, 53).

The appeal of African and Oceanic objects for the Fauves was rooted in those same interests and assumptions which underpinned the appeal of Gauguin's work for the group. They signified the exotic or the 'primitive', redefined according to a Western avant-garde artistic code. Moreover, the absence of an accessible iconography or history to these objects allowed them to be easily absorbed into a modern artistic culture. This decontextualization is one of several reasons why modern artists have been accused of responding to African and Oceanic art ethnocentrically, attributing to its appearances (signifiers) twentieth-century Western meanings (signifieds).

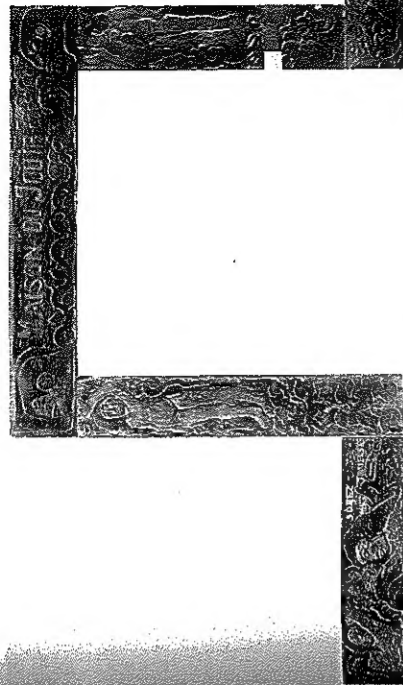


Plate 51 Paul Gauguin, doorframe of *La Maison de jouer (The House of Pleasure)*, 1902, redwood, hinged 242 x 39 cm, right upright 159 x 40 cm, left upright 200 x 39 cm, right base 205 x 40 cm, left base 205 x 40 cm. Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

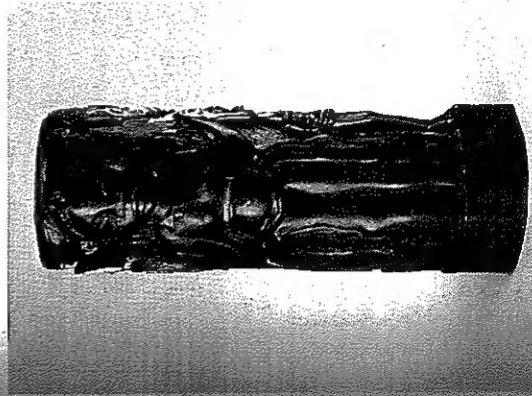


Plate 52 Paul Gauguin, cylinder decorated with figure of Hina and two attendants, 1891-93, banyan wood with painted gilt, 37 x 13 x 11 cm. Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Museum Purchase with funds provided under the Smithsonian Institution collections acquisition program 1981. Photo: Lee Stallsforth.



Plate 53 Henri Matisse, *La Danse (The Dance)*, c.1907, 44 cm high. Musée Matisse, Nice, Inv. 63.2.103. © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 1993.

However, I think it's important to note that this does not involve a conscious 'conspiracy' on the part of Western artists such as Matisse or Picasso to distort and misappropriate the original roles and symbolic meanings of non-Western objects. It was rather the case that they had limited ethnological knowledge or interests, and what knowledge they had was filtered through the institutional machinery, taxonomies, selection processes and colonial politics of contemporary museums, and through various popularized anthropological and academic writings and contemporary political debates. Moreover, Patricia Leighton has suggested that Picasso's use of African art suggests a further level of meaning, which engages with contemporary debates about French colonial activity. She has argued:

The popular image of Africa in pre-First World War France (embraced by modernists as an imagined primal spiritism), the response on the left to French colonial theory, and the inflammatory debates in the press and the Chamber of Deputies in 1905-6 following the revelations of abuses against indigenous populations in the French and Belgian Congos, form an inextricable part of the power of an allusion to 'Africa' in the period 1905-9 and reveal that the preference of some modernists for 'primitive' cultures was as much an act of social criticism as a search for a new art.²¹

(P. Leighton, 'The white peril and l'art nègre: Picasso, primitivism, and anticolonialism', p.609)

A late Fauve work which is based on a North African theme, and in which a range of 'primitive' interests seem to converge, is Matisse's *Blue Nude, Souvenir of Biskra* (Plate 54), completed in 1907 and first shown in the Salon des Indépendants of that year. Matisse travelled in Algeria in 1906, visiting the oasis of Biskra, one of the towns of the Ouled Nail tribes on the northern side of the Sahara. Biskra was one of several North African towns which had featured prominently in the French colonial literature of the time, including André Gide's *The Immorialist*, first published in 1902. Gide describes a fertile settlement of orchards, palm trees and cassia trees amidst a bleak desert, 'a place full of light and shade; tranquil; it seemed beyond the touch of time; full of silence; full of rustlings – the soft noise of running water that feeds the palms and slips from tree to tree' (p.41). A similar image of lush fertility in the barren desert is evoked by Matisse's retrospective account of Biskra as 'a superb oasis, a lovely and fresh thing in the middle of the desert, with a great deal of water which snaked through the palm trees, through the gardens, with their very green leaves, which is somewhat astonishing when one comes to it through the desert' (quoted in J. Flam, 'Matisse and the Fauves', p.226). Although the painting was not intended as a reconstruction of the place he had seen, the image is full of literal and symbolic references to the environment and culture of Biskra, including palm trees, lush green grass and flowers. The colour blue was often used in the Matisse's depiction of North African scenes, but without his explanation we can only speculate about reasons for the dominant use of blue in this painting. It has been suggested that it may be a reference to the blue-tinted skin of the local Berber tribe, the Tuareg, who used indigo dye in their clothing (see The Open University, A315, 'Cubism: Picasso and Braque', and D.C. Gordon, *Women of Algeria*). But such literal references are difficult to prove, and it could also have been chosen by the artist for reasons associated with Symbolist aesthetics, or for a combination of reasons, including some of its local associations.

Matisse, then, has chosen an explicitly colonial subject. Since the conquest of Algiers in 1830 the country had been actively colonized by the French, and the primitivism of the work is tied to the contemporary rhetoric of colonialism. The suggestion of a lush peaceful paradise, with its connotations of 'replenishment' for the civilized traveller is implicit in accounts by both Gide and Matisse, as it is in Matisse's painted image in which a reclining sensual woman (in this case blue-skinned rather than dark-skinned) functions as another symbol of this 'primitive' oasis.

21. Leighton's argument is focused on those artists, like Picasso and Vlaminck, whose anarchist backgrounds would have encouraged them to subvert colonial stereotypes.

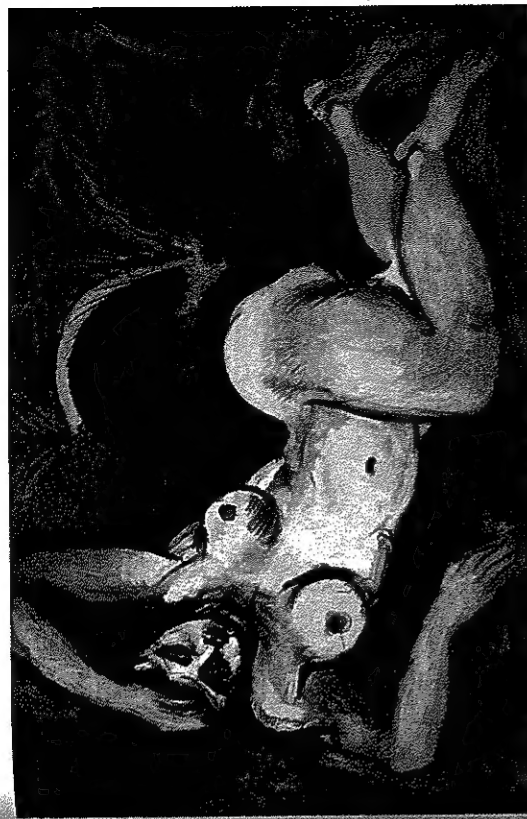


Plate 54 Henri Matisse, *Nu bleu, Souvenir de Biskra* (*Blue Nude, Souvenir of Biskra*), 1907, oil on canvas, 92 x 140 cm. Baltimore Museum of Art, Cone Collection, formed by Dr Claribel Cone and Miss Elta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland BMA 1950.228. © Succession Henri Matisse/DACS 1993.

In fact Matisse reworks a set of well-established nineteenth-century conventions; the female nude or 'odalisque' in an oriental setting – often suggesting the harem or prostitution – was a popular Salon theme, given historic status by artists such as Delacroix and Ingres (Plate 55) and reworked by Salon artists such as Gérôme, Lecomte du Nôty and Dinet, whose paintings on this theme we discussed earlier (Plates 2, 3). And photographic reproductions of Algerian or Arab women, posed partly nude or in 'oriental' dress had become a resource for various forms of popular culture, in particular the colonial postcard (Plate 56). However, the various technical devices employed by Matisse upset some of the conventional expectations (both artistic and ideological) aroused by the subject of an oriental nude. The technique appears both crude and artful. Space is ambiguous, combining a mixture of modelling – or faceting – with flatter areas of colour. This spatial ambiguity is further emphasized by the odd distortions in the woman's body, which frustrate some of the associations of the odalisque pose. These distortions are indirectly related to the forms of 'tribal objects', and some details, such as the bulbous breasts and exaggerated shape of the buttocks, are common features of African statuettes. The nude woman also assumes an impossible pose, a dramatic form of contrapposto, which further confuses the conventional sexual connotations of the theme.

This is not to say that some of the conventional associations are missing. On one level, this is still a voluptuous female nude luxuriating in fertile nature. The 'primitive' – or colonial – subject is still implicitly gendered. Yet Matisse's image cannot be read simply as an exotic luxury item for male consumption. In this painting the means of representation are to the fore, and they serve to confuse or frustrate an easy reading of the woman as a passive (and primitive) sexual object. The distortions, the artfulness, help to produce an image which is less obviously erotic, and less clearly 'feminine', in which the sexual relations are less explicitly conveyed than in the manner of Ingres' *Bain Turc*, or Dinet's *Clair de lune* (Plates 2, 55).

Plate 55 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Le Bain Turc* (*The Turkish Bath*), 1862, oil on canvas, 108 cm diameter. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Giraudon.



Plate 56 *Scènes et types: Odalisque*, postcard from Algeria, from Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

I think it is precisely this ambiguity which provoked Louis Vauxcelles to write of this painting when it appeared in the Salon des Indépendants in 1907: 'A nude woman, ugly, spread out on opaque blue grass under some palm trees' (*Gil Blas*, March 20 1907, quoted in Rubin, *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, p.227-8). Despite the elements of a traditional odalisque pose, this woman was not desirable, but ugly. Over thirty years later, Matisse defended the work as follows: 'If I met such a woman in the street, I should run away in terror. Above all I do not create a woman, I make a picture' (quoted in *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art*, p.228).

The theory of the 'decorative'

Matisse then is anxious to emphasize the actuality of the painting. Before we read it as a woman or an ugly woman we are encouraged to read it as a painted *surface* upon which a woman is depicted. For many contemporaries, and for Matisse himself, this emphasis was itself an indication of the painting's innovatory or 'modern' quality. It was also this emphasis on reading the surface *design* independently of the object depicted that had been encouraged by various Symbolist writers, including Aurier and Denis, in their formulation of the 'decorative' as a positive indication of the 'primitive' and the 'modern'.

Although it is not until Matisse's work from the 1910s and 1920s, with titles such as *Decorative Figure*, that the issue of the decorative and 'decorativeness' seems to be addressed more self-consciously in his paintings, I think that in some of his late Fauve works, including the *Blue Nude*, Matisse can already be seen to be addressing some of the associations of the concept of the 'decorative'. We have seen that in his Fauve works, in particular in his use of the 'paysage décoratif', the debt to a Gauguinesque, post-Symbolist conflation of the primitive with the decorative is in evidence. However, Matisse's work seems to build on various formulations of the concept.

Denis's idea of 'decorative deformations', despite the emphasis it placed on the surface of the painting, was also underpinned by a theory of inner meanings or 'resonances', by the idea that these deformations could evoke 'essential truths'. Such a concept of the 'decorative' was conspicuously at odds with that of some other contemporary theorists. It will probably come as no surprise to learn that Pissarro often used the term pejoratively, to mean something more superficial and something associated with applied ornamentation. For example, he referred to some landscapes by Monet exhibited in 1888 as 'skilful decorations'. But by 1906 the term could not easily sustain its qualitative Symbolist associations, and it seems that in both his writings and his paintings Matisse was seeking to reinvest the concept with value, but value which could be defined principally in relation to *surface*, more than 'inner meanings'. In his *Notes of a Painter*, he formulated a theory of expression based on the interrelationship of the formal components of a painting. The inherent value of a painting was to be derived from a 'harmonious' combination of the various formal elements:

Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing on a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share.

Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings. In a picture every part will be visible and will play its appointed role, whether it be principal or secondary.

(*Notes of a Painter*, p.132)

But in the same essay Matisse also distinguished between 'the superficial existence of beings and things' and his own 'search for a truer, more essential character', an emphasis which reveals the diluted legacy of Symbolist ideas in his theory.

Subsequent Modernist theorists 'have also grappled with the problem of the decorative and its potential slippage towards the superficial. Clement Greenberg's emphasis in 'Modernist Painting' on the criteria of 'flatness' and the need for a modern art to

address itself critically to all 'that was unique to the nature of its medium', would seem to encourage a positive concept of the decorative. But Greenberg also sought to reframe the concept, setting up an opposition between the 'pictorial' and the 'decorative'. He wrote that for a modern painting to be adequately 'pictorial', the decorative qualities (i.e. those of colour, line, composition, rhythm etc.) must be combined with those of the painting as a material object (a two-dimensional canvas etc.). While the Symbolists sought to invest the decorative with primitive and metaphysical values, Greenberg, like Matisse, sought to validate the concept with recourse to 'pictorial' values.

But for Matisse these 'pictorial' values were still rooted in a post-Symbolist theory of 'primitive' equivalents. Greenberg frequently addressed the issue of the decorative in his critical essays, but formulated the problem rather differently. For him, the 'decorative' could have a dialectical function. While on the one hand it could degenerate into superficial ornament, into the pejorative status or the negative decorative, it was also the element which could articulate the abstractness of the work, which could structure an art of 'pure surface'. Thus Greenberg wrote, in 1957: 'Decoration is the spectre that haunts modernist painting, and part of the latter's formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself' (quoted in D. Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg, Art Critic*, p.63).

Greenberg came to see Matisse as an artist who successfully achieved this dialectical process. Although Matisse did not produce a work of 'pure surface' in that his canvases are never entirely abstract (i.e. non-figurative), Greenberg argued that Matisse had achieved this transformation by 'flattening and generalizing his motifs for the sake of a more abstract, 'purer' and supposedly soothing effect' (quoted in *Clement Greenberg*, p.63). In the process Matisse was actually increasing 'the tension between decorative means and non-decorative ends' (*Clement Greenberg*, p.63). In relation to Matisse's works then (particularly those from the 1910s and 1920s) Greenberg formulates – or at least allows for – a concept of the 'decorative' which is not exclusive to an abstract surface, but which is enhanced by the tension between the decorative surface and the figurative elements. Although Greenberg has discarded the spiritual values and inner meanings, we are reminded, once again, of the important legacy of Symbolist ideas according to which the 'decorative' was a 'deformation of nature', and crucial to 'a theory of equivalence' which I discussed earlier. The concept of the 'decorative' then has been constantly reshaped in modern aesthetic theory, and through its associations with the discourses of primitivism has consistently informed the theory and practice of a modern art.

The expressive and the Expressionist

In the earlier section 'Primitivism and *Kulturkritik*' I suggested that the conventional nature/culture opposition which underpinned contemporary European notions of the 'primitive' is both sustained and confused in some of the theory and practices of modern German art at the time. In the following section I want to consider this issue in relation to the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the Brücke group, and the emergent ideology of 'Expressionism' with which the group is associated. In the preceding section I suggested that the idea of the 'decorative' was central to the contemporary French understanding of a 'primitive' (i.e. modern) art. Recent research has shown that the Brücke group were also interested in concepts of decoration, and both Erich Heckel and Kirchner worked on decorative schemes for their studios which were influenced by 'primitive' motifs.²² But I also want to suggest that in pre-war German avant-garde art the 'primitive' was more often predicated on the related idea of the art (and by implication the artist) as 'expressive', as directly conveying some 'authentic' or unmediated expression.

²² This issue is discussed in Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity*.

The belief that the artist could directly convey some kind of inner feeling – emotional or spiritual – through art was a fashionable idea in German artistic and intellectual circles at the beginning of the twentieth century. We have seen how a revival of nineteenth-century Romantic philosophy, the legacy of *Kulturkritik* and the writings of Nietzsche had already encouraged artists to seek 'new freedoms', to break free from civilized constraints and Academic conventions and somehow express themselves more freely; these ideas are fundamental to what we call German 'Expressionist' art.

The term 'Expressionism' has been used with different emphases in modern art history. As a stylistic label it has often been used retrospectively to denote, and implicitly to account for, a quality of distortion and exaggeration of forms found in the work of any artist or period. However, when used to describe *German* Expressionism it also takes on a specific historical and cultural meanings, some of which I will be considering in this section.

There's a sense in which all artists are 'expressing' themselves; in that their own perceptions, personalities and interests are involved in the process of painting or the production of an art work. But how do we distinguish between this general notion of expression and an 'Expressionist' art? On what grounds do we decide that a painting is directly expressive of some inner feeling, that it is 'Expressionist' in the sense described above? In the case of the Brücke artists, their works have been described as 'Expressionist' for several reasons. Firstly, because the artists claimed at the time of producing their pictures that they were communicating more direct emotion or feelings (although many of them subsequently resisted the label Expressionist). Secondly, critics and art historians have consistently described Brücke works as 'Expressionist' because of the way they look.

Let's consider these two points in relation to two early Brücke works, Erich Heckel's *Sainted Child* and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Clay Pit* (Plates 57, 58) both of which have been seen as examples of early Expressionist painting. The first point raises the problem of artistic intention. But because the artist claims that he is directly expressing some kind of emotion in paintings like these it does not automatically follow that the painting then contains some kind of fixed meaning (which is the emotion in question). On the second point (that is the issue of labelling the work according to what it looks like), we can suggest reasons why these two paintings have been labelled Expressionist. In both works the brushwork appears crude and unfinished; individual brushstrokes are visible and seem to have been loosely applied. In addition, non-natural colours are often employed, as in the face of Heckel's child or in Kirchner's landscape. As a result, the subject-matter appears distorted; there is an uncomfortable tension between the images depicted and the visible brushwork on the canvas surface. In contemporary Academic terms this mode of painting revealed a lack of competence, a crude unfinished technique. But for those who subsequently used the label 'Expressionist', it was valued according to a different criteria. It was seen to be expressive of much more than the subject-matter depicted; it was seen as clear evidence of the artist's physical and emotional involvement with the medium, of a rejection of sophisticated forms of artistic competence in pursuit of the direct expression of the artist's feelings or emotions onto the canvas.

Clearly these implications of the label raise some problems. Many of the technical aspects of these works can be attributed as much to the influence of French Neo-Impressionist and Impressionist techniques (such as the individual brushstrokes of bright colour) as to the artist's 'expressive urges'. And how do we distinguish between supposedly 'authentic' expression and technical incompetence? One of the problems is that many of the popular meanings of the label Expressionist which I have discussed above are untestable. They are largely based on subjective claims for what a work expresses, or on a personal response to what a work looks like. What we can do is assess the artistic and cultural context in which such art emerged, and then try to sort out some of the more difficult or complex meanings that these Brücke works held both for their contemporaries and hold for us today.